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# POLITICS AND THE INSANE.

BY DR. HENRY SMITH WILLIAMS.

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Two or three centuries ago it was customary to deal with the insane in a way that to us seems simply barbarous. The unfortunate victims of mental disease were then thrust into dungeons, and often chained there. They were scourged at times with whips and clubs, and not infrequently they were burned or otherwise executed for witchcraft.

It is an easy inference from these facts that our ancestors of those days were a very inhuman and barbaric lot. But the validity of this inference is very much weakened by the further fact that the barbarous treatment of the insane just noted was still everywhere in vogue—barring the pyre—a single century ago, and continued to be practised but little modified, in many places, far into the present century, at a period, that is to say, when our own grandparents, and even our parents were on the scene of action. Now we know that these immediate progenitors of ours were not barbarians, and this knowledge may serve to vastly temper our judgment of our remoter ancestors. But why did either the one or the other permit atrocities to be practised which we now shudder to recall?

The answer is very simple. Our ancestors remote and less remote did not know that in treating the insane like dangerous beasts they were acting inhumanly. Enslaved to custom—as we all are—they dealt with the insane as custom dictated. They thought the scourge a righteous instrument for casting out devils; and it was not bad but misguided hearts that gave the pyre approval. In other words, it was ignorance, not viciousness, that swung the lash and plied the faggot to the destruction of the pitiable victims of mental disease. No doubt indifference and selfishness contributed a full share toward keeping the people in ignorance,

but be that as it may, ignorance itself was the cardinal sin that led to the abuses which now seem so unaccountable;—ignorance as to what insanity really is, ignorance as to the real duties that sane humanity owes to its alien unfortunates.

We of to-day do not scourge the insane or chain them in dungeons. About a century ago three or four wise physicians—Pinel in France, Tuke in Scotland, Rush in America—taught the people that insanity is not a curse but a disease, and when this new idea had had time to make its way against the prevailing misconception—when ignorance was in some measure banished—a new era dawned for the insane. To-day kindness, gentleness, tolerance, pity are the mottoes of those who deal directly with the unfortunate, once called a madman or lunatic, but now more charitably spoken of as an insane patient; and the people, no longer ignorant as to this particular matter, are stirred to indignation at the mere suggestion that this spirit has been violated in any given instance. All of which, according to my contention, does not prove that we are infinitely better than our grandparents, who quite approved the things we now abhor; but does show that we are grown in some ways vastly wiser.

But unfortunately our wisdom is not yet all-inclusive, and in dealing with the insane to-day we are making some mistakes that, I suspect, will seem as anomalous to our descendants as the mistakes of our ancestors seem to us. With one of these mistakes we shall have to do in the present paper. I refer to the custom, widely prevalent, though fortunately not universal, of allowing partisan politics to become influential in the conduct of the asylums in which the dependent insane are cared for. The baleful effects of this custom are as yet fully understood only by those persons who have had opportunity to view the subject as it were from the inside. The public at large is still in ignorance of the real bearings of the matter: hence the continuance of the evil. Ignorance—fostered by indifference and selfishness—is still, as of old, the explanation of the abuses which society tolerates. In the hope of in some degree dispelling this ignorance, the present paper is written.

Let me show by some illustrative examples, the ways in which politics has encroached upon a domain that of all others should be free from its infringements.

The simplest and most readily demonstrable manner in which this encroachment may be made, is by the direct application of the spoils system to asylum appointments. This has been done again and again in various of our States. Perhaps the most recent, and certainly one of the most glaring illustrations is furnished by Kansas. When Populism triumphed at the polls in that State, a mad stampede for the spoils began, and the asylum for the insane at Topeka was among the institutions on which the spoilsmen fixed their greedy eyes. With a woman at their head, more's the pity, they descended joyously on this asylum, and as it were sacked it without quarter. Faithful, earnest, competent officials and employees of the asylum who had given their lives to the service, were ignominiously discharged, without pretense of their being unworthy, simply because their places were wanted to reward the politically faithful. Candor was the only merit of the action. No charges were trumped up, no attempt was made to conceal the real animus of the removals. It was purely a question of partisan political affiliations, and no one was asked to think it anything else. The official body that had direct charge of the disgraceful procedure is called—one really blushes to record it—the State Board of Charities.

And what a band of the faithful came to take the places of the discharged officials! There was real humor in the situation were it not for the pity of it. The halt and the blind, intellectually and physically, trooped from all parts of the State, bringing their political credentials, and were at once installed in the offices of the deposed asylum officials. Did they know aught of the care of the insane, of the methods of asylum management? Nonsense! What did that matter? Were they not of the faithful? Had they not worked and voted for the dominant party? Were they not entitled to their reward?

The sequel follows so naturally that it scarcely needs telling. Managing a large asylum is no child's play, and of course matters were soon chaotic at Topeka. Presently there was internecine war among the faithful, culminating in the arrest of the Superintendent on charges preferred by the Assistant Superintendent—the former of course bringing counter charges. Within a year the situation became so desperate that even partisan eyes could no longer be blinded, and the experienced Superintendent who had been deposed was recalled, to undertake the arduous task of

bringing the asylum back to the high level on which it was before the political onslaught was made.

Let me repeat that such onslaughts as this, and they are recurring constantly in one State or another, are permitted by the people not through viciousness but through ignorance. The people of Kansas are not barbarians, however subject they may be to epidemics of the various phases of political insanity, but they are, like people in general, profoundly ignorant of insanity and all that pertains to its treatment. The State Board of Charities simply failed to realize what they were doing when they let politics threaten the welfare of the indigent insane of Kansas. I trust that they are somewhat wiser now, and that their experience may not be without a wholesome effect elsewhere.

Another chapter of the story of Politics and the Insane is furnished by the experience of those States in which so called double-headed asylums have been established. New Jersey furnishes a typical illustration. Here competent medical officers are installed in the asylums, but these officials are woefully hampered by the appointment of political wardens with powers almost or quite equal to those of the chief physician. The full implications of this system are not manifest to the uninitiated, else it would long ago have been banished. I have not space to detail them here, though the subject is tempting. Suffice it that such a double-headed institution is as much a monstrosity among asylums as is a two-headed human being among men. I am told that there was such a human freak on exhibition in the museums of New York not long ago. If I am correctly informed, the right head of this anomalous being controlled the left leg, and the left head the right leg; and the individual—or was it two individuals?—could not walk, because the two brains could not be taught to act concertedly. Well, a double-headed asylum is crippled in much the same way. The plan of having two heads for one organism is so radically wrong that no compensating circumstances can make it work efficiently.

Do the good people of New Jersey wilfully perpetuate such a grotesque system? Assuredly not. Most of them do not even know that they have such an anomaly among them. The politicians begot the monstrosity, and maintain it for the patronage it brings, and the people complaisantly submit to the imposition simply because they do not know that it is an imposition; just

as in most other affairs we let the boss politicians govern us while in our ignorance we fondly nurse the delusion that we are governing ourselves. But fortunately political affairs have changed recently in New Jersey. Quite a different Board of Control from the old political one now has charge of the affairs of the asylums of that State, and at last there seems some reason to hope that, before long, partisanship may give place to rationality in the conduct of the great charity of caring for the indigent insane.

But perhaps the most telling illustration of the evils that result when the political vampire fixes his hold on supposedly charitable institutions is furnished by existing conditions in regard to the care of the indigent insane in our large cities. It has come to be accepted as quite in the natural order of things that the insane wards of large cities shall be wretchedly cared for. Boston furnishes an honorable exception, sending most of her indigent insane to the excellent State asylums, but New York, and Brooklyn, and Chicago, and Philadelphia—the communities where a large share of the wealth of this country is aggregated—are disgraced in the eyes of right-thinking people by the manner in which they care for their insane dependents. And, in each case, the explanation given by those conversant with the facts is that partisan politics enters into the conduct of asylum affairs.

The exact methods by which the spoilsman operates vary somewhat in the different communities, but the results to the insane are much the same everywhere. Perhaps I can best make the matter plain by citing somewhat in detail the conditions as they exist in New York city.

There are about 6,000 insane patients in the city asylums of the metropolis. The buildings in which these patients are housed have a normal capacity of about 4,000 inhabitants. Some of the buildings are new and reasonably good, but many of them are old and ill-adapted for asylum purposes, and a few are not decently habitable.

As to the character of the food, clothing, and general attendance supplied these patients, a statement of certain financial facts will perhaps be most convincing. The State asylums of New York, which are excellently but not extravagantly conducted, cost the State between four and five dollars per week for each inmate, exclusive of special appropriations for building and repair,

etc. Conservative persons agree that as much as this is necessary to properly conduct the institutions, and in point of fact much more than this—as much as \$6 per week in some cases—has in the past been at times expended.

Now the New York city asylums are much less favorably located, as regards economical management, than the country asylums, yet the largest *per capita* expenditure per week for the care of their inmates ever applied for their conduct is \$2.80. The difference between \$2.80 and \$5 therefore represents relatively the difference between the conditions of the city and State asylums of New York, provided they were under equally judicious management. No one need be told that \$2.80 has not the purchasing power of \$5, and nothing more need be said as to how the insane dependents of New York city are clothed and fed and attended.

But it remains to note the anomalous fact that whereas only \$2.80 is applied for the uses of the insane in the city asylums, almost twice that sum is assessed upon the property of the taxpayers of the city for the care of indigent insane. The excess over \$2.80—amounting in the aggregate to about \$600,000 annually—is turned into the State treasury, to be applied towards the maintenance of the State asylum system, with which the city has nothing whatever to do, beyond thus helping to support it financially. Brooklyn does the same thing, and together these two cities pay to the State half the entire sum required to conduct the State asylum system. Meantime, as they half care for the insane of the State, they also only half care for their own insane, with the difference that in the latter case no one is at hand to supply the other half. All of which seems very anomalous.

The explanation is found in the old story of politics—a story of legislative deals, of machine manipulations, of spoils. It came about in this wise. When the State Care Act, providing that the State of New York should assume control of all dependent insane and provide for them directly, instead of leaving that duty to the several counties, was under discussion in the Assembly, the political machines of New York city and Brooklyn had no mind to give up control of the patronage that came to them through handling the moneys appropriated by their respective cities for the care of the insane. So, after a battle, a compromise was effected by which these cities were to retain control of their own insane, provided

they paid their full *pro rata* shares of the tax for carrying out the State system, exactly as if they were to enter into the system. That is to say, they were to share the financial responsibilities of the system without entering into its benefits.

Now, it is easy to see why the people outside the cities consented to this, since it took a large burden of taxation off their shoulders, but it is not so evident at first glance why the cities consented to be robbed in such a manner. The real reason, as just intimated, was that the machines were determined to retain control of asylum patronage and were willing that the taxpayers should be mulcted indefinitely to accomplish that end, if necessary.

And so the deal was consummated ; the State-Care Act—in itself an admirable measure—was passed ; New York and Brooklyn retained control of their insane, their taxpayers being mulcted about \$750,000 a year for the privilege ; the political machines handled the funds and doled out patronage to their friends ; and the insane—got along as best they might, housed in buildings constructed and repaired by political contractors, clothed by other political contractors, and fed by still others.

It must in justice be added that there is one mitigating circumstance in connection with the systems under consideration. This is the fact that worthy and competent medical officers are in charge of the New York and Kings County asylums. These men, hampered as they are by lack of funds, and by the political propensities of the Commissioners to whom they are responsible, have labored faithfully for their patients, and it would be doing them great injustice not to recognize the value of their efforts. Carrying such a handicap, their fight has been almost a hopeless one, but they have kept it up bravely. Especially is this true in New York city.

The local asylum systems of Philadelphia and Chicago have not even this one redeeming feature. In both of these cities the condition of the indigent insane is even worse than in New York. There are competent medical officials in each case, it is true, but these men are made subordinate to lay superintendents who, whatever their qualifications, are political appointees. Under such conditions the best results in asylum management are not even to be hoped for. It is conceded the world over that a medical man should be the undisputed head of every asylum for the insane, so



the Philadelphia and Chicago systems are utterly indefensible. The reason they are persisted in is that the office of superintendent of the hospitals of which the asylums are a part, is one of the political perquisites of the party in power; and that physicians are seldom politicians of the spoilsman order.

The practical results of the political methods of caring for the indigent insane of Philadelphia may be told in a few words, which I quote from a personal letter written by one perfectly familiar with the facts: "The present system consigns the insane to wretched, crowded dark buildings, that have been odious and odorous for half a century, with no facilities for suitable out-of-door exercise or occupation. The plans and grounds of the asylum belong to a period long passed, and within the buildings the allowance of fresh air equals but a few square feet per patient. All in all, the condition of the insane here is one of the saddest spectacles to be seen in this country. Yet the politicians have obstinately resisted every effort for improvement." It scarcely needs saying that the reason the politicians resist efforts at improvement, is that the existing system gives them better facilities for patronage than could be hoped for under an improved system,—since in the nature of the case, improvement would imply banishment of the politicians from the field.

As regards the condition of the indigent insane of Chicago—or such of them as are not sent to the State hospitals—the ground may be covered by saying that they are a few degrees worse off than those of Philadelphia. Eight hundred to a thousand patients are crowded into quarters that might with some semblance of decency accommodate half as many. A political lay superintendent is in charge, and the spoils system has full sway in the appointment of all employees, to the lowliest scrubber. The abuses that have been from time to time unearthed in this institution in the past ten years read like the records of a sixteenth century "mad house." They are quite too brutal and disgraceful to be recorded here. The world already knows of them through newspaper reports, which for once could hardly be exaggerated.

The most that can be said for the Chicago system is that it is probably not quite as bad as it was seven or eight years ago. At that time the County Commissioners, who have ultimate authority in the matter—and several of whom are now in prison serving

well-earned sentences—set an example by falsifying bills for coal, clothing and provision; the asylum Warden—who now keeps a gorgeous saloon and gambling house in Chicago—followed close in their wake (supplying himself with sixty suits of silk underwear at county expense, among other accomplishments); and the subordinate employees, many of whom were notorious women and criminals, conducted themselves in all respects as might be expected of such characters. The ultimate victims of each phase of the political chicanery were, of course, the supposed recipients of charity.

This, indeed, must be the obvious result everywhere of political interference with asylum affairs. Did space permit I would show more in detail the channels through which such interference operates disastrously. But everyone who is at all familiar with the meaning of the word “patronage,” as applied to political affairs, especially in our cities, can supply the details for himself with sufficient accuracy. By recalling, for example, the number of large contracts—for coal, food, clothing, building, repairing, etc.—that must be given out each year by the persons controlling asylum affairs, and which may be, and under existing conditions are, given to political *confreres* exclusively, it will be understood what a political leverage the money appropriated for the care of the insane may be made to wield, even where there is no direct stealing of public funds. How dearly the politicians prize this patronage is well shown by the fact, already cited, that the authorities of New York city and Brooklyn were willing to pay three-quarters of a million dollars annually to the State rather than relinquish their hold on the local asylums. Had they chosen otherwise, their 9,000 indigent insane might have been cared for properly and even handsomely, as is done in the State hospitals, without a single dollar's additional expense to their taxpayers, instead of being treated wretchedly as they are at present. But little enough cared the politicians for the interests of the 9,000 dependents as against the selfish and unlawful interests of the political friends, whose loyalty, thus purchased, was needed to maintain the integrity of the “machines.”

At last, however, the power of the corrupt machines has been broken, for the time being, in both New York and Brooklyn; and, the friends of the insane seizing the opportunity so long waited for, are making strenuous efforts to have the asylums of

these cities transferred to the State system. The existing law authorizes such a transfer, and unless some political trickery at Albany interferes, the transfer will be effected within the next few months. If this is accomplished—as all right-minded persons must hope it will be—the asylums of these great municipalities will be placed on the same high level with the existing State hospitals. It will be a striking and gratifying change from the wretched conditions of the past and present, and it will give to New York city and Brooklyn the enviable distinction of caring for their indigent insane better than the similar dependents of any other large city in the world are cared for. For it is a noteworthy fact that the large cities of the Old World have been as derelict as our own in their provision for the insane. Political interference is not with them as marked as with us, but everywhere there has been a tendency to niggardliness in providing for this most helpless class of dependents in cities, as compared with the provision made for them in rural districts. The asylums of Paris are antiquated and inadequate, and the same was true in London until recently, when modern quarters were provided for at least part of the insane. This London asylum, the new building of the Boston asylum, and a few of the buildings of the New York city asylum, furnish, so far as I am informed, the only exceptions to the rule that the buildings in which the insane dependents of cities are housed are miserably unsuitable. No large city, unless it be Boston (which, as already said, cares for only a few insane directly), has an asylum plant that as a whole is anything like up to date and adequate.

And so it will continue to be while politics controls asylum affairs. And that will be, as long as the residents of our cities are sufficiently ignorant and indifferent to permit existing conditions to continue. As I have said over and over, it is ignorance and not viciousness on the part of the people as a whole that tolerates the abuses that prevail. It was the awakening of the people to true conditions last fall that enables us to hope for reform in the management of the metropolitan asylum through transfer out of the hands of the politicians. A similar arousing of the people of other cities must be secured before reforms can be effected, for the politicians will never willingly relinquish one iota of patronage, and until they are forced aside little can be done.

Fortunately it is possible to point out the initial step which the reform movement must take in all cities alike. This is the separation of the affairs of the insane from those of every other class of dependents. At present the affairs of different classes of dependents and delinquents in all our large cities are merged under control of a single board, known usually as a Board or Commission of Charities and Correction, which in all cases is a political board, and through which the political patronage is controlled. This massing of interests of diverse classes is illogical and cumbersome (the New York Department of Charities and Correction controls about 17,000 individuals), but in all large cities it has been persisted in (having originated naturally enough, perhaps, while the communities were relatively small), partly through inertia, but very largely because the politicians have felt that a division would result in loss of patronage. Whenever the people are wise enough to demand that the interests of the insane be made paramount to the interests of politicians, they will insist on making insane patients a class by themselves, under independent management. A movement is on foot to accomplish this in Philadelphia, and it would be accomplished, of course, in New York and Brooklyn by the proposed transfer to the State. It is to be hoped that both movements will prevail, and that Chicago and other cities may soon also find means to emancipate their insane dependents from their political bondage. It is a burning shame that the most helpless of defectives should be preyed upon by politicians anywhere, and a double shame that the communities in which most of the wealth of the country is aggregated, and where the most advanced ideas are supposed to prevail, should be especially subject to such vandalism.

It is bad enough to see the spoils system applied openly to the asylums of communistic Kansas; it is worse to see it applied insidiously in New York. Only ignorance permits it in one community or the other. But let it not be forgotten that ignorance, when due to selfishness and indifference, may come to be almost a crime.

HENRY SMITH WILLIAMS.